

Luke 16:19-31  
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*19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24 He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames." 25 But Abraham said, "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us." 27 He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." 29 Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." 30 He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." 31 He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." "*

The description in our gospel is so visual, I'd like for you to close your eyes as you listen again to the beginning.

*"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.*

Did you see it? The scene takes shape--a picture of contrasts in my mind. See the finery of the rich man's clothes, the bare, ulcerated body of Lazarus. Other senses are engaged, too, as we smell and taste the rich man's feast; feel Lazarus' aching hunger and the dog's tongue on his painful sores.

It is often said that it is the preacher's task is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. This powerfully evocative text does both.

First, it truly comforts the afflicted. After describing the poor beggar, Lazarus, it quickly tells us he *died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.*

Well, there is justice and moral comfort in that. But there's ever so much more consolation in the King James translation, and in the original Greek. Listen well to hear these words

*And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom.*

Does that remind you of anything?

"Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham..." This text is the source, friends. No surprise that it's a Negro Spiritual. A comfort to the afflicted. The image of Abraham cradling the poor beggar Lazarus for eternity has comforted the afflicted for nearly two thousand years.

The bulk of the story, however, is intended to afflict the comfortable. As, indeed, it does. This is one of the parables unique to Luke that target the rich. Luke's entire gospel holds up God's special care for the poor and powerless--beginning with the Magnificat: "God has put down the mighty and lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty). Remember, too, that Luke's Beatitude goes "Blessed are you who are poor..." not "blessed are the poor in spirit" (Matthew). And different from Matthew again, Luke's brief Beatitudes are followed with the Woes: "Woe to you who are rich..."

So what exactly IS the sin of the rich in these parables? Is it wealth, itself? A few weeks ago we heard the parable of the Rich Fool. He's the man whose land yielded such abundant harvests that he had no place to store it all. Just as he has resolved to build new barns, fill them and retire to a self-indulgent life, God says to him, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' Jesus concludes "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Like our rich man, the rich fool's sin was greed. Just as our man refused to share with Lazarus even a crumb from his groaning board the rich fool never thought to share his bounty with others. Wrapped in their material comforts, both are blind to needs of others. Not surprisingly, each seems to live solitary a life--selfishly cut off from relationship with other people. They are disconnected, isolated.

Both men die in ignorance of their sin. They have defied the Law and the prophets, the core commandments to love God and love their neighbor. Even the fires of Hades don't temper our rich man's arrogance, his disrespect for Lazarus. He doesn't get it. He still feels entitled. NHe still expects to be served! But he is alone, now, for eternity.

His isolation began in life his greed separated him from the love of God and other people, from belonging to a loving community. In my book that's hell on earth.

And it's achingly common in our own time.

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr wrote in a recent daily post

*The greatest dis-ease facing humanity right now is our profound and painful sense of disconnection—disconnection from God, certainly, but also from ourselves...from each other, and from creation.... Our world needs to be reminded of our interdependence and our inherent union with what is.. "*

The rich man was disconnected by his own selfish will. Many of us today are disconnected, too. Fear-fueled prejudices separate us from one another and from God's love.

Sadly, one disconnect comes when we let ideas about our own wealth or poverty separate us. That happened to me big time on my first trip to Honduras. I was walking in the wealthy suburb by the Episcopal bishop's office in San Pedro Sula; some houses had armed guards on the roofs! When I came to the neighborhood's edge I saw it was ringed with shelters made of cardboard and scraps of roofing tin. Children living there in abject poverty met me, shyly, wide eyed, wondering--I imagine--where this tall white-topped creature came from. My sense of shame overwhelmed me: shame about my own privilege--the small seminary apartment I lived in, the comfort, the safety, the freedom to study that I enjoyed. I had to fight that shame to be present, to return the children's curious, welcoming smiles.

Here and now some of us let shame about our relative privilege block us, keep us from reaching out, to minister in other parts of our own city.

We must not. We cannot let shame or fear disconnect us from the love of God and neighbor. Jesus calls us to take down every barrier that might divide us. His recipe: be together. Work together. Play together. Eat together. Share our stories. Build relationships. Find and celebrate our common humanity. Be the Kingdom (or Kindom) of God.

This spring and summer we have been expanding relationships locally across boundaries of ethnicity, religion, neighborhood, culture. They are helping us live more and more into that

Kindom vision. Don Hawkinson organized a feast and play date with Somali neighbors, for example. We'll have more notice to field our soccer team for a rematch next summer. A small group of us met several times with members of Kwanzaa parish on the Northside; we broke bread, shared scripture and prayer. We connected deeply. More to come there, also.

Finally, John Corlett organized St. John's crews whose rehab work helped to birth a vital new ministry on the Northside devoted to Kinship Across Lines of Difference. It's called Circle of the Beloved, an Episcopal Service Corps ministry for young adults committed to live together simply and prayerfully, while working for justice in solidarity and in kinship with the marginalized.

Today we celebrate our partnership with the Circle of the Beloved. The visionary leader is the Rev. Craig Lemming, also serving as our Deacon today. He and the four young adults who make up the Circle, are sharing their stories with us at the Forum. We welcome them. And we'll be following their work prayerfully through the year.

In closing I want to return to the image of Lazarus in the arms of Abraham. Affliction is not just a condition of the poor. Suffering is part of the human condition. Today, for example, many of us feel truly afflicted by the divisions, the anger, the conflict, the violence that fill our media. When the stresses of life feel overwhelming, remember that the solace, the comfort of Abraham's bosom—of God's unconditional love—is your home, too now and for eternity.